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**Zondo Commission – Mentor’s recollection of Gupta house inconsistent with expert findings**

The credibility of former MP Vytjie Mentor’s evidence to the state capture commission took another knock on Thursday with the testimony of architect Erna Wiese in relation to the layout of the Gupta family home in Saxonwold, Johannesburg. Mentor alleges a meeting occurred in 2010 between herself and Ajay Gupta.

Wiese was part of a team of senior architects, valuers and surveyors working within the Department of Public Works who, in December last year, were mandated to accompany Mentor and a team from the commission on an inspection of the house. Wiese and her colleagues were tasked with assisting the commission by following Mentor’s lead as, on the day, she would point out distinctive features that she remembers from her visit to the house nine years ago. Mentor has accused Gupta of irregularly offering her the post of public enterprises minister, an undertaking that only the sitting president of the country can make.

She first testified before the commission in August last year, detailing how she flew from Cape Town to Johannesburg one Monday morning in late 2010, under the impression that she had been invited to a meeting with former president Jacob Zuma. Upon arrival at OR Tambo International Airport, however, a delegation sent by Gupta fetched her, and she was driven to the offices of one of their companies, Sahara Computers in Midrand. There she met Gupta, who introduced himself to her and exchanged some small talk. When she enquired about the whereabouts of Zuma, she was told he would be available to her later.

Mentor was then driven to the family home where again Gupta, and not Zuma, would appear. After some discussion, the ministerial offer was made to Mentor in exchange for a favour to the Guptas, whereby she would have to influence the abolishment of a lucrative South African Airways flight route between Johannesburg and Mumbai, India. The abolishing of the route would then accommodate India-based Jet Airways, which would then take it over. Gupta has denied the claim that such a meeting ever happened, and applied to commission chair, Deputy Chief Justice Raymond Zondo, for permission to cross-examine Mentor. His application was denied as, together with his brothers Atul and Rajesh, Gupta was not prepared to return to South Africa, for fear of victimisation and incompetence of law enforcement agencies like the Hawks and the National Prosecuting Authority, according to his lawyer, Mike Hellens.

Wiese and her team took note of every feature that Mentor pointed out to them, but could not conclude that the features she claimed had been there and were possibly altered or removed, did ever exist. From the point of their arrival on the property, Mentor questioned the layout of the house in proximity to several other built structures she remembered to have been there in 2010. In that light, the team walked around to four other properties to eliminate any possibilities of having arrived at the wrong house. They eventually settled on the same house that they had arrived at, and proceeded inside for an inspection of the interior. From the number of the steps leading up to the front door of the house, to the structure of some of the rooms inside, Mentor queried almost everything.

The steps, said Mentor, were narrower and more numerous than she remembered, an observation Wiese queried, saying that their height could not have been altered since 2010 because it was in alignment with the structure of the house, which has two storeys. Mentor insisted that nine years ago she was more easily able to climb the steps, despite being in crutches at the time. Where she remembered the material of the steps being marble, Wiese told the inquiry they were in fact granite.

Another main feature that came into question was a pillar in the lounge of the house, which Mentor said she remembered to be in a specific spot. According to Wiese, for a pillar to have been there, and then later removed, there would have to be some physical indication of its former location, and her team did not find this.

“The purpose of a pillar is usually to hold something up,” said Wiese. “In a room that is wide, there would have to be a pillar to hold up the upstairs slab of floor above.

“We could not see on the floor surfaces or ceiling surfaces where a column might have been.”

In reference to the guest bathroom that Mentor said she had used, the team did not find the room to have the gold finishings that she testified to. What they did find, said Wiese, were what appeared to be dated finishings that did not look to have been inserted only recently.

Wiese did point out, however, that her team’s inspection was only visual and a more extensive one would have to be done to determine more information. “In order to definitely identify the features, you need more coding into the structures, to see if they were there or not.”

If the requirement is proof beyond doubt that the features had indeed been in the house, a team of specialists would have to be appointed. The public works department, however, does not currently have the expertise required, which would include a paint expert, a material conservator and an architect who can conduct a historical mapping exercise. This sort of investigation, said Wiese, would cost about R800 000 per month, excluding the cost of restoration of structures back to their original form.

Prior to Wiese’s testimony, the inquiry heard that of her former colleague in Parliament, Dennis Bloem. He was one of the people that Mentor told of her encounter with Gupta in Johannesburg.

During a meeting between the two, Mentor swore Bloem to secrecy, before telling him what had happened during her visit to the Gupta home. Asked by evidence leader Zinhle Buthelezi what he did upon learning this information, Bloem said he could do nothing, as Mentor had said she planned to take action herself later.

It was only in 2016 when Mentor and former deputy finance minister Mcebisi Jonas came out in the public with information relating to the Guptas, that Bloem laid charges of treason and corruption against Zuma and the Gupta brothers at the Brooklyn police station in Pretoria.

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